86-2088

No. _____

Supreme Court, U.S.
FILED
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JOSEPH F. SPANIOL, JR.
CLERK

IN THE

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

October Term, 1986

HARRY BONNER, JR.,

Petitioner,

vs.

WALTER FORD, individually and in his official capacity as Deputy Sheriff of Dale County, Alabama; and DALE COUNTY, ALABAMA,

Respondents.

ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

PETITION FOR PETITIONER

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April 28, 1987

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Trial Court awarded adequate damages.

2. Whether the Trial Court's failure to award punitive damages is an abuse of discretion.

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDINGS BELOW

Harry Bonner, Jr., Plaintiff.

Walter Ford, Defendant.

Dale County, Alabama, Defendant.

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OPINION BELOW

The Opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit entered February 19, 1987, and the Opinion of the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, Southern Division, entered March 28, 1986, are set out in the Appendix hereto.

JURISDICTIONAL GROUNDS IN THIS COURT

Judgment was rendered in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, Southern Division, on March 28, 1986.

The jurisdiction of this Court arises under 28 U.S.C. Section 1254 and Rule 19, Rules of the Supreme Court of the United States.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

This case involves the provision of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution pertaining to equal protection of the laws, which provides:

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. U.S.C.A. Const. Amend. 14, Section 1.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Plaintiff sued the Defendants for injury to his foot caused by Defendant Ford shooting Plaintiff on May 4, 1984. Trial was to the Court without a jury on March 19, 1986, and the Trial Court rendered its findings and Judgment on March 28, 1986.

The Court found:

1. That the Plaintiff was unarmed at the time of the shooting;

2. That Defendant Ford had no information that the Plaintiff was armed or dangerous;

3. That Defendant Ford did not claim that he saw a weapon before shooting Plaintiff;

4. That Plaintiff was not suspected of having committed any violent crimes; and,

5. That Ford could not have harbored

a reasonable belief that Plaintiff was threatening his life or serious injury.

The Court found the testimony of Ms. Hazel Dawkins, a witness to the shooting, the most credible but felt that the Plaintiff's testimony lacked credibility in several (inarticulated) respects. Nonetheless, Plaintiff was awarded Eight Thousand Dollars ($8,000.00) in compensatory damages on medical expenses of One Thousand, Nine Hundred, Thirty Seven Dollars and Twenty-One Cents ($1,937.21). The Court made no award of punitive damages, stating that Ford simply made a mistake.

The scope of review is whether the compensatory damages were adequate and whether the Court abused its discretion in not awarding punitive damages.

JURISDICTIONAL GROUNDS IN THE TRIAL COURT

The jurisdiction of the Trial Court, the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, Southern Division, arose under 28 U.S.C. Sections 1331 and 1343.

ARGUMENT

As America prepares to celebrate the Bi-Centennial of the United States Constitution, we should pause to ask if there really is cause for celebration. Our Country is facing unprecedented deficits, killer diseases, Americans held hostage abroad, and the erosion of Civil Rigts of those here at home.

Civil Rights ... life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness ... equal protection under the laws ... and justice for all. The American dream. Harry Bonner's dream.

Harry Bonner never dreamed that his pain, his life, would be regarded as so insignificant. Harry Bonner was shot by Walter Ford, knowingly and intentionally. He did not sustain a simple flesh wound; his ankle was broken by the bullet! And to this date, Harry Bonner walks with a limp. Is $8,000.00 enough to make him whole? Is $8,000.00 enough to compensate him for the pain he suffered and will continue to suffer each time he takes a step? The Trial Court thought so.

The Trial Court viewed Harry Bonner and Walter Ford as lucky. Yes, Harry Bonner is lucky. Lucky he was not hurt more seriously or killed. But does that mean we reward Walter Ford? He, too, is lucky; lucky that no one else was hurt that night. Lucky that he, unlike Harry Bonner, does not have a limp to remind him of May 4, 1984.

How much is a gunshot wound, broken ankle and limp worth for a man thirty-five (35) years of age? In a recent case in California, a young man who had been beaten by the police settled his case for $30,000.00. He suffered only facial cuts and bruises. In a recent case from Rhode Island, two white youths were awarded $15,000.00 in damages simply because they were struck by a Rhode Island State Trooper.

Why is the use of deadly force which temporarily, at least, crippled the Plaintiff here worth less than non-crippling, non-scarring assaults on others. Probably because Harry Bonner had the misfortune of being a black man in Alabama. The ramifications of the Trial Court's decision are frightening. It tells law enforcement officials that even if they violate the law, so little in damages will

be awarded so as to condone their conduct. Here, $8,000.00 is more like a nominal, rather than a compensatory, award. Mr. Bonner, take this $8,000.00 and be glad he didn't kill you.

It is well settled that punitive damages are allowable for constitutional torts. Smith v. Wade, 461 U.S. 30 (1983). It is also undeniable that individual public officers are liable for punitive damages for misconduct on the same basis as individual defendants. Smith, supra, page 35. Moreover, the standard adopted in Smith is that of recklessness or callous disregard for the Plaintiff's rights. Under the Trial Court's finding, there can be no serious debate touching on Ford's recklessness; Plaintiff submits that to discharge a firearm in the general direction of one unarmed, non-violent target in a residential area at night is

the height (or depth) of recklessness.

The facts here are not sufficiently distinguishable from the facts of a long line of cases wherein punitive damages were awarded and upheld on appeal. See, Vetters v. Berry, 575 F.2d 90 (1978); Palmer v. Hall, 380 F. Supp. 120 (1974); Guyton v. Phillips, 532 F. Supp. 1154 (1981); and, Bell v. City of Milwaukee, 746 F.2d 1205 (1984). Vetters involved a beating at the hands of the police. Palmer involved a fact situation very similar to the one sub judice. Plaintiff was shot while running away from the police officer involved. Unlike Bonner, however, Plaintiff did have an object which could have been and was in fact mistaken for a weapon.

While Palmer suffered more serious injury to his leg, he was awarded a sum for pain and suffering and mental anguish

as compensation. That amount was $35,000.00. Moreover, because the policeman's conduct was clearly unconstitutional, his "mistake" garnered a $15,000.00 punitive award. In Guyton where the excessive force used led to the decedent's death, the Court noted that he lived for some fifteen minutes. That Court felt that the pain and suffering endured for that period was worth at least $15,000.00. And, with respect to two of the officers involved, their conduct in using unreasonable, unnecessary and unjustifiable force was punishable to the extent of $35,000.00 and $50,000.00 respectively.

Walter Ford acted recklessly and callously. Firing his weapon as he did that night exhibited a blatant disregard for the lives and safety of the citizens in that neighborhood, as well as for

Harry Bonner. Walter Ford could have wounded or killed any of the persons in that general area, including Mrs. Dawkins, whom the Court found so credible, or her grandchild. To simply waive off the mandate of punitive damages here, is to do real violence to the notion that life and limb are more important than effectuating the arrest of an unarmed, non-violent person.

The Trial Court abused its discretion in failing to award punitive damages. The Court trampled upon Harry Bonner's dream; the dream that he was entitled to equal protection under the same laws that awarded fair damages to white victims of police officer misconduct ... the dream that justice truly is for all. Harry Bonner will never know life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as he once did. Every day when he awakens and every night

when he retires, he is mindful that his ankle will never be the same....

Harry Bonner's world was shattered by a bullet from Walter Ford's gun and his life will never be the same. Nevertheless, he still wants to believe that all men are created equal and will be treated as equal, not only by our society, but also by those charged with enforcing and upholding the law - the Courts. When America celebrates the Bi-Centennial of our Constitution, will Harry Bonner be there? Will he be able to stand proud and say that the Constitution does have meaning, that his life has meaning, that the Court protected his inalienable rights, his Civil Rights ... his American dream...?

CONCLUSION

The Plaintiff contends that the Court erred in failing to award adequate compensatory damages and in failing to award any punitive damages. The Plaintiff submits that this Court should reverse the damage award of the Trial Court and award Plaintiff compensatory damages commensurate with his injuries and assess punitive damages against Walter Ford in excess of $25,000.00.

Respectfully submitted,

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that I have served 3 copies of the foregoing Brief upon Hon. Bill Kominos, 300 Painter Avenue, Ozark, Alabama, 36360, by regular mail, postage prepaid and properly addressed to him on the 15th day of April, 1987.

Malcolm R. Newman
MALCOLM R. NEWMAN
Attorney for Petitioner

A P P E N D I X

IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS

FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

No. 86-7306
Non-Argument Calendar

HARRY BONNER, JR.,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

versus

WALTER FORD, individually and in his official capacity as Deputy Sheriff of Dale County, Alabama; and DALE COUNTY, ALABAMA,

Defendants-Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama

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(February 19, 1987)

Before GODBOLD, VANCE and JOHNSON, Circuit Judges.

PER CURIAM: AFFIRMED. See Circuit Rule 25.

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF ALABAMA
SOUTHERN DIVISION

HARRY BONNER, JR., Plaintiff,	)	
vs.	)	CIVIL ACTION NO. 85-H-600-S
WALTER FORD, individually and in his official capacity as Deputy Sheriff of Dale County, Alabama; and DALE COUNTY, ALABAMA, Defendants.	)	

JUDGMENT

In accordance with the attached memorandum opinion, it is ORDERED, ADJUDGED and DECREED that:

(1) Plaintiff have and recover from defendant Walter Ford the sum of $8,000.00.

(2) Plaintiff have and recover nothing from defendant Dale County, Alabama.

(3) Costs are taxed against defendant Ford.

DONE this 28th day of March, 1986.

'TRUMAN HOBBS'
UNITED STATES DISTRICT
JUDGE

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF ALABAMA
SOUTHERN DIVISION

HARRY BONNER, JR.	)	
Plaintiff,	)	
vs.	)	CIVIL ACTION NO. 85-H-600-S
WALTER FORD, etc.; et al	)	
Defendants.	)	

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff has brought this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against Deputy Sheriff Walter Ford for wrongfully shooting plaintiff in the foot in violation of his Fourth and Fourteenth Amendment rights and against Dale County because Ford allegedly was acting pursuant to an unconstitutional "deadly force" policy. The Court takes jurisdiction of this case under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1331 and 1343. The nonjury trial of this cause was held on March 19, 1986, and the Court

now enters its findings of fact and conclusions of law pursuant to Rule 52(a), Fed. R. Civ. P.

FACTS

On May 4, 1984, Kent Stewart was arrested, apparently for possession of cocaine and marijuana. At the sheriff's office that afternoon, Stewart agreed to help the Dale County Sheriff's Department make an arrest of plaintiff, known at that time to Stewart as "Cooter Pill." On Ford's instructions, Stewart met plaintiff at a local bar, and arranged for plaintiff to meet him later that evening on the "Block," an area in Ozark, Alabama. Stewart rode to the rendezvous with Lieutenant Jones of the Dale County Sheriff's Department and Officer Speck, an Ozark police officer. Stewart identified plaintiff and told the officers that plaintiff was carrying

marijuana in his right sock.

Officers Jones and Speck then released Stewart and called defendant Ford for assistance. Jones and Speck began walking toward plaintiff. Upon seeing them, plaintiff turned and began walking in the opposite direction toward Ford. Ford said to plaintiff, "I need to speak to you." Plaintiff responded, "For what?" He then began to run. Simultaneously, Ford yelled: "Sheriff's Department - Halt." A chase ensued. Ford fired a "warning shot" into the air, but plaintiff continued to run with Ford in pursuit. Sheriff Mixon testified that his deputies were under orders never to fire a warning shot, and Deputy Ford testified that he had never fired a warning shot before this incident.

As plaintiff ran across the next street, Ford states he saw plaintiff

reach toward his right sock, and Ford thought plaintiff might have been reaching for a weapon. He had been informed that plaintiff was carrying marijuana in his socks. Plaintiff denied ever reaching toward his socks.

Plaintiff's flight led him to a fence, which he attempted to go over. Plaintiff testified that as he attempted to hurdle the fence, his shirt caught the top of the fence and caused him to fall. He testified that when he got up, he began to run to his left alongside the fence when he was shot. Ford, however, stated that he did not know a fence was there, and when he saw plaintiff make a "turning movement," he fired.

The bullet entered near the very bottom of plaintiff's left heel and exited through the inside of his ankle. Plaintiff had no weapon, but several

plastic bags of marijuana were found in his socks.

The sole eyewitness to this shooting was Mary Hazel Dawkins. Ms. Dawkins was sitting on her front porch with her grandchild. She heard a noise to her right, turned and saw plaintiff running very hard toward her fence. She looked again and saw a second person running behind plaintiff. The second person shouted "Halt" more than once, and plaintiff began to leap the fence by swinging his legs across the top. She testified that just as plaintiff reached the top of the fence, he was shot and fell into her yard. She then heard a loud voice say "Now run," and she did with her grandchild. She then used the telephone in her house to call the police. The Court finds Ms. Dawkins' unbiased description of the incident to be the most

credible.

An ambulance arrived shortly and took plaintiff to Dale County Hospital, which then referred him to Flowers Memorial Hospital. Plaintiff's medical expenses total $1,937.22.

Plaintiff testified that he retains a limp and continues to use a cane. Plaintiff said he left his cane at home the day of trial to avoid looking as though he was seeking sympathy. However, two investigators with the Alabama Bureau of Investigation, Gerard Herring and Johnny Griffin, testifed that on several occasions they had seen plaintiff walking normally and without a cane, with the only exception being when they saw him in court on another matter. No medical evidence was submitted suggesting that plaintiff has any permanent or continuing impairment from his injury.

Sheriff Mixon investigated the shooting and determined that Deputy Ford acted properly, and Lieutenant Livingston of the Alabama Bureau of Investigation also investigated and determined that Ford acted properly. However, Lt. Livingston concluded that the shooting was justified not only because he found that Ford was acting to protect himself, but also because it was necessary to prevent plaintiff's escape. In fact, Lt. Livingston testified that Ford acted as any officer would in attempting to arrest a known drug dealer after he refused to halt.

Sheriff Mixon testified that his policy, which he conveyed to his deputies immediately after his taking office, denied any right to shoot a fleeing felon merely to prevent his escape. Under his policy an officer was authorized to use

deadly force only when the officer or another was in imminent danger of death or serious injury.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

Plaintiff contends that Deputy Ford's shooting constituted an unreasonable seizure in violation of the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments. Clearly, Ford's actions constituted a "seizure," and accordingly, Ford's use of deadly force was subject to the reasonableness requirement of the Fourth Amendment. See Tennessee v. Garner, _____ U.S._____, 1105 S.Ct. 1694, 1699 (1985). The United States Supreme Court recently addressed the reasonableness of deadly force and concluded that the use of deadly force to prevent the escape of felony suspects is unconstitutional unless the officer "has probable cause to believe that the suspect poses a threat of serious

physical harm to the officer or others," or "if there is probable cause to believe that he has committed a crime involving the infliction or threatened infliction of serious physical harm." Id. at _____U.S._____, 105 S.Ct. at 1700-01. See also Pruitt v. City of Montgomery, 771 F.2d 1475, 1482-83 (11th Cir. 1985); Acoff v. Abston, 762 F.2d 1543, 1547 (11th Cir. 1985). No one suggests that there was any reason to believe that plaintiff had committed a crime "involving the infliction or threatened infliction of serious physical harm." Therefore, if Ford shot plaintiff merely to prevent his escape, or if he did not have probable cause to believe plaintiff posed a threat of serious physical harm, Ford's action would violate plaintiff's rights as defined by the Supreme Court of the United States.

The undisputed evidence is that plaintiff was unarmed; Ford had no information to the effect that plaintiff was armed or dangerous; nor did Ford make any claim that he thought he saw any weapon. Plaintiff was not suspected of having committed a violent crime. In fact, the only evidence Ford had that plaintiff had committed any crime was that Kent Stewart had said plaintiff was carrying marijuana.

Apparently, Ford contends that his fear was reasonable because plaintiff reached toward his right sock and because plaintiff made a "turning movement." However, Ford had been informed that plaintiff was carrying marijuana in his socks. Furthermore, Ford admitted that he never even saw plaintiff turn completely toward him. If the facts of this case could be regarded as providing

probable cause to believe that the suspect posed a threat of serious physical harm, then the substantial protection which the Supreme Court sought in Garner to provide for the fleeing suspect would be largely illusory. Every chase of every suspect poses some threat of personal injury to the officer participating in the pursuit. It requires physical courage and dedication to join in a hot pursuit as Officer Ford did on this occasion. But the Supreme Court has made clear that the use of deadly force simply is not permissible under circumstances such as were present in this case. In the opinion of this Court, when Officer Ford shot plaintiff he did not have a reasonable belief that plaintiff was threatening his life or serious injury; accordingly, this Court must find that Deputy Ford violated the consitu-

tional protection for plaintiff as defined by the Supreme Court.

As to plaintiff's claim against the County, the Court cannot find that Dale County's policy was unconstitutional. Sheriff Mixon testified that he had clearly informed his deputies of his policy immediately after his election, and his policy allows the use of deadly force only when the life of the officer or a third party is in danger. Because Sheriff Mixon's policy does not allow an officer to shoot merely to prevent escape, and requires at least a reasonable fear of imminent harm, if not the stricter requirement of an actual danger of harm, his policy provides at least the protection requied by Garner and is therefore constitutional.

Officer Ford also raises the defense of good faith immunity. Dale County's

policy was clear, however, prior to this occurrence that an officer could not shoot a fleeing suspect unless he had a reasonable belief that his life or serious injury was threatened. Since the Court has found that there was not a reasonable basis for a belief that Officer Ford's life or serious injury was threatened, his good faith immunity claim must fail.

Having now determined that Deputy Ford is liable to plaintiff for this shooting, the Court now must turn to the issue of damages to be awarded plaintiff. Plaintiff's medical expenses totalled $1,937.22. Plaintiff is entitled to recover these expenses. Undoubtedly, plaintiff suffered pain from the bullet wound. However, the testimony of Gerard Herring and Johnny Griffin indicated that plaintiff has not suffered

nearly as much pain as he would have the Court believe, and the Court found plaintiff's testimony lacked credibility in several respects. Accordingly, the Court feels a total sum of $8,000.00 is adequate to compensate plaintiff.

Plaintiff also seeks damages for humiliation because Ford allegedly stood over him and said, "Don't move, God damn it, I'll blow your damn brains out." However, nothing in this statement, though graphic, is actionable. Nor is the Court of the opinion that punitive damages are warranted in this case. Ford made a mistake and took a shot in the dark during a hard chase without the requisite probable cause as later determined by a court, but it was not such a heinous mistake under the circumstances as to justify punitive damages. Plaintiff and Ford are fortunate that the

injury to plaintiff was not much more grave.

The Court also notes that defendants' counsel have attempted to make an issue of whether Ford acted in his official or his individual capacity for the purposes of liability and damages. Because Ford acted beyond the scope of his county's shooting policy and beyond State and constitutional law, his actions necessarily were taken in his individual capacity.

A separate judgment will be entered in accordance with this memorandum opinion.

DONE this 28th day of March, 1986.

'TRUMAN HOBBS'
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE